

The Museum of Modern Art

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PATRICK HENRY BRUCE: AMERICAN MODERNIST

A retrospective exhibition of the work of the pioneer American abstract painter Patrick Henry Bruce, who committed suicide in 1936 having already destroyed most of his work, will be on view in the first-floor galleries of The Museum of Modern Art from August 22 through October 10, 1979. PATRICK HENRY BRUCE: AMERICAN MODERNIST, which has been organized by The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (where it appeared May 31 - July 29), and made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, is being codirected by William C. Agee, Director of that Museum and by the noted critic Barbara Rose. It is being coordinated at The Museum of Modern Art by John Elderfield, Curator of Painting and Sculpture. Following its appearance in New York, the exhibition will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts of Virginia, where Bruce grew up and studied.

In their Introduction to the accompanying Catalogue Raisonné of Bruce's work* (to be published by The Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) Agee and Rose have written: "During the course of our collaboration, we have reached joint conclusions, including

* Patrick Henry Bruce: American Modernist. A Catalogue Raisonné. By William C. Agee and Barbara Rose. 240 pages. 242 illustrations (35 in color). Published by The Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

our fundamental belief that had Bruce left anything more than a fragment of an oeuvre (barely 100 paintings remain), he would long before now have been considered one of the masters of 20th-century art."

The exhibition will trace the evolution of this still relatively little known artist beginning with his often Cézannesque still lifes and landscapes of 1910 - 12, on through his first fully mature paintings of ca. 1916, in which he forged an authentic and original Cubist style related to Picabia and Delaunay. Finally, the largest portion of the show, including 23 works, will study Bruce's geometricizing still lifes done between 1917 and 1930. These works, called simply Peinture or Nature Morte, are indicative of Bruce's drive toward a "pure" painting.

A descendant of Patrick Henry, Bruce was born in Virginia in 1881 and entered the Richmond Art School when he was sixteen. In about 1902, he went to New York, studying first with William Merritt Chase and then with Robert Henri.

In January 1904, Bruce traveled to Paris, where, about three years later, he met Gertrude and Leo Stein and their circle. At the Steins' open house he became immersed in modernism and met many artists and writers, most importantly Matisse. When the famous Matisse School opened in 1908, Bruce was one of the original members. Matisse, who had a great influence on Bruce, introduced him to the art of Cézanne, whose influence is apparent in Bruce's work at that time. In these still lifes, landscapes, and portraits, a selection of which will be on view, Bruce sought to maintain Cézanne's ordered and structured forms and modulation of planes through changes of hue and value.

Beginning in mid-1912, and continuing until 1917, Bruce began to move away from Matisse's tranquil world and became increasingly fascinated with the pulsating energies of the modern city. Influenced by Robert Delaunay and the Orphic Cubism movement which liberated color as a means of nonfigurative painting, he extended his love of color to a Cubist-based abstraction to capture the dynamism of the twentieth century.

After World War I began, Bruce broke away from Delaunay and forged a style based on more open, geometric color areas. By 1916, he had reached full maturity as a painter, moving toward his own Cubist-based mode of color abstraction. The Compositions from this period, of which six are featured in the exhibition, rank in the opinion of the show's codirectors, with the work of Marin, Dove, O'Keeffe, and Hartley. Bruce's systematic method of constructing these abstract paintings was based on optical laws in which each color influences the hue and value of neighboring colors.

The radical upheavals of the war drastically affected Bruce. His pre-war colleagues either were dead or had dispersed, and he was virtually the only American remaining in Paris. During the twenties he grew more morose and depressed, and, convinced that his work would never be understood in his own lifetime, he exhibited less frequently. "A demanding artist to begin with," Agee and Rose note, "he became ever more demanding of himself and of others." The paintings from this time comprise pure geometric forms interspersed with the familiar objects of his everyday life. These geometric still lifes are notable for their unusual choice of colors--pastel pinks and blues against blacks and whites--and for their equally innovative

presentation of three-quarter, profile, and frontal forms. Bruce destroyed many of his canvases in the early 1930s; only twenty-five of the abstracted still lifes from this last period remain. Unlike most other American painters of his day, Patrick Henry Bruce had classicizing instincts and ambitions, and he made what Agee and Rose call "an original contribution to Cubism as well as to color abstraction."

The Museum's overall exhibition program is supported in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.

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For further information please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, (212) 956-2648, or Bruce Wolmer, 956-7298, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019.
